

Answering Sensitive Questions: Creating a Safe Space for Youth

Expanding Our Experience and Expertise:
Implementing Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Programs
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This session's objectives:

By the end of this session, participants will:

- Learn guidelines for answering sensitive questions related to sexuality;
- Practice answering young people's questions about sensitive sexuality topics with their colleagues;
- Share challenging scenarios with colleagues and create strategies to address these scenarios; and
- Understand how the ability to answer sensitive questions creates a safe space for youth and creates a more effective facilitator

Who's in the room?

- Direct service providers
- Managers/Administrators
- Others?



Types of Questions

1. Requests for Information
2. “Am I Normal?”
3. “Permission-seeking”
4. Shock Questions
5. Personal Beliefs





Requests for Information

- If you know the answer, great. If not, it's okay to say "I don't know".
- Answer in an age-appropriate manner
 - Don't give complicated answers; avoid technical jargon
- If the question contains values component, make sure various points of view are presented
- Refer to group agreements if inappropriate or problematic question

“Am I Normal?” Questions

- Validate their concerns
 - “Many young people worry that...”
 - “I get that question a lot”
- Refer to other resources as appropriate
 - Parents, clergy, family physician, school counselor, etc.





Permission-Seeking Questions

- “Is it normal to...”
 - Avoid use of the word “normal”
 - Stick to the facts
- “Did you...when you were my age?”
 - Redirect to group agreements
 - Establish boundaries related to answering personal questions
- Enforce universal values
 - Exploitation is wrong, responsibility is good, everyone deserves to be safe and respected, etc.

Shock Questions

- Reword question using medically accurate language
 - Establish ground rule about using proper vocabulary
- Refer to group agreements if inappropriate or problematic question





Personal Questions

- Establish boundaries ahead of time
 - Depending on scenario, it can be okay to answer
- If you do respond, present your view as one of many
- Share to build group cohesion or demonstrate empathy – never to meet your own needs or win favor with youth
- DON'T share information about personal sexual practices or behaviors



Practice!

- Pair with one other person
- Take turns playing the role of the facilitator and the role of the young person
 - DO: practice as though you are actually answering the question
 - DON'T: paraphrase “Well, I’d probably say something like...”
- Continue until both people have played both roles

Debrief

- Is the answer factually correct?
- Was anything left out?
- Would this answer be acceptable to the parents in your community?
Why or why not?





General tips

- Buy yourself time
 - “That’s a great question.”
 - “Thanks for asking that.”
 - “A lot of people ask me that question.”
- Include many points of view in your answer
 - “For some...for others...for you”
- Use an anonymous question box
- Caution using the words “choose to have sex”
 - 7% of females report that their first sexual intercourse was non-voluntary, especially with older partner



General tips continued

- STOP, DROP and ROLL
 - Stop talking and think about the question you've been asked
 - Drop your opinions and personal judgments, values, etc.
 - Roll the question into a discussion topic for the group
 - “That’s a great question, I’d like to hear what you think...”
 - “Has anyone else been thinking about this and, if so, what are your thoughts?”
- Check for understanding
 - “Does that answer your question?”




General tips continued

- Be aware of your non-verbal communication
 - Body language can communicate distaste or disagreement
- If youth only consider one point of view, facilitator can introduce other ideas
- DO: laugh, turn red, stutter
 - It's okay to have a reaction to questions, especially those intended to shock
 - You're human! 😊


General tips continued

- “What happens...?” questions
 - Typically asked by younger adolescents
 - Consider physical and emotional consequences of these scenarios





*"I've learned that people will forget
what you said, people will forget what
you did, but people will never forget
how you made them feel."
Maya Angelou*



Youth won't remember every fact you communicate, but...

- They will remember if they felt comfortable, validated or reassured
- Convey positive sexual health attitudes through your words, tone of voice and facial expressions



Resources

- FLASH Curriculum Guide to Answering Student Questions:
<http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/personal/famplan/educators/teachers.aspx>
- ETR RECAPP Skills for Educators:
<http://www.etr.org/recapp/index.cfm?fuseaction=pages.EducatorSkillsDetail&PageID=21>
- Planned Parenthood – Talking to Kids about Sex and Sexuality:
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/talking-kids-about-sex-sexuality-37962.htm>
- Michigan Department of Education:
http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/3_Answering_Sensitive_Questions_251749_7.pdf

Thank you!



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